

# Snow geese the latest wildlife management dilemma

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All too often we read about the harmful effects of human population growth and activity on wildlife. However, an increasing number of wildlife species that were formerly rare and in dire need of protection have recovered beyond all expectations and now pose new problems that challenge resource managers traditional way of thinking.

How do we manage wildlife populations that have increased to an extent that they now threaten our economic, health, or ecological well-being? Are such populations best managed locally on a case-by-case basis, or is a more comprehensive approach needed?

Double-crested cormorants, white-tailed deer, mountain lions, and gulls have all been the focus of recent controversy because of this dilemma.

Snow geese are the latest example of a wildlife species that has wildlife managers scratching their heads. Decades of human efforts to protect and enhance snow goose populations have succeeded beyond all expectations. The mid-continent population of snow geese has grown by almost 300% since 1960.

The population now exceeds 3 million birds and continues to expand at the rate of more than 5% per year. Human-induced changes to the agricultural landscape and increased refuge provisions during winter and staging periods have effectively released snow geese from winter carrying capacity restraints that formerly sustained populations at lower levels.

The burgeoning snow goose population is destroying its own Arctic breeding habitat. Three thousand pairs of geese sometimes nest in one square kilometer of tundra, resulting in over-grazing and over-grubbing that turn delicate arctic tundra into barren wasteland.

Biologists fear that large portions of the arctic ecosystem are threatened with irreversible degradation unless humans intervene and control the population growth of this species. The alternative is that millions of geese will suffer malnourishment, disease, starvation, and ultimately a population crash. Many other species of birds of arctic-nesting birds will also suffer.

A working group of 17 biologists from various government and private organizations recently issued a report, "Arctic ecosystems in peril: report of the Arctic goose habitat working group," that recommended reducing mid-continental white goose numbers by 5 - 15 % annually.

The proposed radical liberalization of hunting regulations to accomplish this, including:

1) legalizing the use of electronic

calling devices for snow goose hunting.

2) legalizing baiting in special snow goose population reduction seasons.

3) providing additional snow goose hunting in and around state, provincial and federal refuges, and

4) extending the harvest of snow geese for southern hunters (northern native hunters already have the right to harvest geese year-round).

The report concluded that there is virtually no risk of over-harvesting mid-continent white geese within the next several years. Sometimes it is necessary to "cut down a few trees to save the forest."



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